

# Alexis Graman

PLEIN-AIR AND STUDIO PAINTINGS

May 11. - June 15. 2024



LACATENA FINE ARTS



*Piazza della Signoria*, 2023  
olio su tela / oil on canvas  
61 x 61 cm / 24 x 24 in  
Unique

*La noche viene de los ojos ajenos*

*Night comes from others eyes*

LFA is happy to announce the first solo presentation of work by Alexis Graman (\*1989) introducing a curated selection of plein-air and studio paintings produced by the artist over the past two years.

Graman was brought up between rural Montana (US) and Xalapa, Veracruz (MX). As a child he lived in the mountains near the Eastern coast of Mexico with his mother, an immigrant from Greece, and his father, an American linguist, who spoke only in Spanish to him till he was eleven years old.

He started his career as a professional translator of modern Mexican poetry<sup>1</sup>, before painting became the designated medium of reflection.

Graman talks about approaching the act of painting with terms such as ‘transfer’<sup>2</sup> and ‘alteration’, referring to a carrying over - the transformation of an image in relation to another spatio-temporal realm, entity or medium. The moment when the image that he has originally sketched, becomes something completely else as a result of a painterly composition.

The best condition for the poem is one of not-knowing, and the poet has a better chance of reaching that with dictation than with self-expression. The better the poem, the less responsible the poet is for it. “Dictation,” as Jack Spicer<sup>3</sup> brought to our attention, provides not only a means to explore an abject, apophatic, queer poetics, but

1 It is interesting to mention Graman and Jeremy Prynne meeting in California, in 2012. Prynne is a British poet, famously known for having authored a seminal monograph on Ferdinand de Saussure entitled *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993). The encounter with J.H. Prynne will have a great impact on the young Graman.

2 Übertragung (Translation—Transference—Translatability—Transfer) *Trans-fēro, tūli, lātum* (also written *trālātum*), *ferre*, v. To bear across; to carry or bring over; to convey over, transport, transfer (syn.: *traduco, traicio*). II. Trop. A. In gen., to convey, direct, transport, transfer. [...] To avert from one's self. B. 1. To put off, postpone, defer, in respect of time. 2. Of speaking or writing. a. To translate into another language. b. To transfer to a secondary or figurative signification, to use figuratively or tropically. 3. To apply, make use of (for a new purpose, etc.). 4. To change, transform. From Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

3 Spicer's view of the role of language in the process of writing poetry was probably the result of his knowledge of modern pre-Chomskyan linguistics and his experience as a research-linguist at Berkeley.

also a chance to articulate a sense of longing for a poetics of proximity between the world and the word that is otherwise impossible – the world of memories, for instance – repeatedly linking the linguistic communion between poet and received language, as a fantasized analogue to the gulf between signifier and signified, desirer and object of desire.

The loss of interest in physical agency (ie. in the gestural element) and the absence of representational meaning are two elements of a broader poetics of absence which characterizes Graman's work as a painter. Graman's practice, in fact, seems to involve not only a change in the means of artistic representation, but to mark as well a break with a certain representational system – contemporary painting often being trapped in representational subtexts, in talks about process, or about identity.

The concept of transfer refers here to a carrying over, a transport, a displacement of an image into a new form of composition.

Both this idea of translatability, as the distance between a work and its medium – and its general potential for reflection – happen to be two of the key ideas that emerge in Walter Benjamin's critical work on translation, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 1923, ("The Task of the Translator").

Despite the fact that Benjamin's essay has undoubtedly become the most reviewed, discussed, analyzed and thus relevant piece of translation theory produced in the last century, very few critics have remarked its close relation with Benjamin's own work on Jena Romanticism. And among the few critics who have examined this crucial "literary connection," is Paul de Man, one of the fathers of deconstruction. In his essay on Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" included in *The Resistance to Theory*, 1982, De Man reveals an extremely fascinating aspect of this connection which seems particularly relatable to the terms of Graman's poetics of transfer:

"Translation is also, says Benjamin, more like criticism or like the theory of literature than like poetry itself. It is by defining it in relation to Friedrich Schlegel and to German Romanticism in general that Benjamin establishes this similarity between literary criticism (in the sense of literary theory) and translation."

De Man also suggests that for Benjamin translation constitutes the *determination of the medium of reflection*, and hence is fully dependent on the translatability of the

In the legendary Vancouver lectures he elucidated his ideas on "transmissions" (dictations) from the Outside, using the comparison of the poet as crystal-set or radio receiving transmissions from outer space, or Martian transmissions. The radio oracle derived from Cocteau's film *Orphée*, often cited by Spicer in his lectures. Although seemingly far-fetched, his view of language as "furniture", through which the transmissions negotiate their way, is grounded in the structuralist linguistics of Zellig Harris and Charles Hockett.

original: "Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, and are contained in the issue of its translatability. The conception of translation as a form is thus of paramount importance for Benjamin since, following the principles of Jena Romanticism, it constitutes an immanent potential inherent in the original that only "manifests itself in its translatability".

We may call this connection a natural one, or more specifically a vital one. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life, as from its afterlife (Überleben).

An image transported en-plein-air is a very different image than one transported from a sketch and then turned into a painting.

The translatability of an event – visual or linguistic - is not simply a property of the original work, but rather a potentiality that can be simply realized or achieved, and that therefore has less to do with the enduring life usually attributed to the work than with what Benjamin calls its "afterlife" or its "survival" (Nachleben, Fortleben, Überleben). [...] This is because translatability is never the property of an entity, such as a work, but rather of a relation. (De Man, "A Touch of Translation: On Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator," 74)

*Runner*, 2023, oil on hemp, is a studio painting which stems from a sketch taken at Feldafing, southwest of Munich. A jogger crosses the frame on a strip of concrete, running through a wet evening at the park. Once it is turned into a painting, the image becomes rather violent, the human figure is all stretched out as by speeding off, away from the picture.

Graman's paintings are always poised just on the face side of representation, dipping all the way over toward that sudden flip, as if an effort were being made through feeling strongly, in simple words, to sneak up on the event of a man ruminating about something, or celebrating something, without rhetorical formulae, in his own inept awkwardness. It's that poised ineptitude and awkwardness of the anti-academic teacher, the scholar of linguistics who can't say what he knows in formal language, and has chosen to be very naive and look and hear and do. Like Jack Spicer, Graman is not a very happy poet. He is not a happy painter either.

He is obsessed with possibilities he can only occasionally realize, and too aware of contemporary life to settle for anything less in his work than what he probably can not achieve.

As an intrinsically reflexive and translational movement, transfer not only incorporates the other, but by producing in the process a series of “precarious images” helps the self imagine itself through the transferential movement that correlates both.

The essential aspect of this reflexive movement of true originality is that due to its transferential nature it keeps subverting and displacing itself in its radically productive encounter with the other image: true originality, in other words, is precisely the way in which a reflexive movement, in returning to and upon itself, in effect subverts itself—finds something other than what it had expected, what it had set out to seek; the way in which what is revolving, what returns to itself, radically displaces the very point of observation.

Alexis Graman lives and works in New York City.

He received his MFA from the New York Studio School in 2017 and his BA in Studio Arts and American Studies from Bard College in 2012.

We would like to thank Paula Querido, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.

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*Runner*, 2023  
olio su canapa / oil on hemp  
63.50 x 51 cm / 25 x 20 in  
Unique